

“DID YOU EVER THINK ABOUT TELLING?” WHAT KEEPS A CHILD FROM DISCLOSING?



Child sexual abuse is a serious problem in the United States and likely the most underreported type of maltreatment and the most difficult to detect. Child sexual abuse is a crime that exists in secrecy unless a child suffers significant injuries, there are eyewitnesses to the maltreatment, or there is some form of evidence, all of which are uncommon. When researchers examine retrospective studies of adults, as well as information from identified child sexual abuse victims, they report that a substantial number of children do not disclose abuse when it occurs. Unfortunately, delaying disclosure of abuse preserves the secrecy around the child's experiences and possibly exposes the victim to repeated maltreatment. Some people, even including professionals who are involved in the investigation and prosecution of abuse, as well as lay people serving on juries, may believe the child is fabricating their experiences if disclosure is delayed.

What Keeps Children from Telling?

Understanding the many reasons children do not disclose abuse can assist both the forensic interviewer, as well as professionals involved in the investigation, and, ultimately, the possible prosecution of an alleged offender.

Idiosyncratic factors belonging to the child, as well as relational factors often play a role in delayed disclosure of abuse. Idiosyncratic factors can include the following:

- the internalization of blame in which a child feels shame, guilt, or responsibility (believing they caused the abuse or allowed it to happen);
- fear of disappointing others; or
- a belief they are damaged, especially in cultures that prize female virginity.

We also see children minimize the abuse (i.e., “It only happens when dad is drunk.”) and lose trust in others.

We also have to consider the cognitive limitation of the child – many have insufficient understanding of sexuality, or confusion about what has happened. Some offenders will tell children this is what happens to all girls, or that it is the responsibility of the adult to teach the child about sex. There are numerous lies offenders tell children, especially younger children, to explain what is happening. Latency age children are often told that the non-offending parent will be angry at the child, and that the child has to keep the secret. A child may not understand what is happening until they are much older and have gained more knowledge regarding sexual contact.

Age is a factor in disclosure, with the number of disclosures increasing with children between the ages of 6 and 16, then decreasing at age 16 as older children are likely to postpone disclosure, especially in cases of intrafamilial abuse.

Relational Factors between the Child and Offender

We must also examine and be attuned to the relational factors that impact a child's disclosure. When a child lives in a family experiencing violence and dysfunction, the child may not feel safe in disclosing abuse, may fear no one will believe them, or fear reprisals from the offender or others in the family. Seventy percent of children, aged 5 to 13, fear negative consequences for themselves or the offender if they disclose.

Late latency-age children and adolescents can also self-sacrifice, believing they can bear the abuse, in the mistaken belief that if the offender is abusing them, he or she will not abuse other children in the home. Children may also live in families that have "laws of silence" in which children are taught not to tell outsiders "their business" and to remain silent if asked about maltreatment or other activities in the home environment.

It is vitally important to understand the totality of the relationship between the offender and the child. There are multiple facets to all relationships, and child abuse professionals must understand the power dynamics within abusive relationships. For example, the child may love their grandfather but not the touching games he forces the child to play. As such, interviewers should examine both the positive and negative elements of the relationship between the child and the offender within the forensic interview.

In about half of all cases, there may be meticulous manipulation of the child, family, and the community. Targeting the nuances of manipulation during the interview helps children provide a more complete account

of their experiences, while providing investigators a broader understanding of the reasons for delayed disclosure.

Victim Selection

Asking questions regarding victim selection or access can assist in better understanding a child's experiences during the initial phases of the manipulation process.

- "Tell me about meeting [...]."
- "What did you think about [...] the first time you met him/her?"
- "How did you feel about [...] the first time you met him/her?"
- "What are some of the things he/she talked about?"
- "What did your family or friends say about [...] when you first met him/her?"
- "Did your feelings ever change about [...]?"

Asking about Differential Treatment, Enticements, or Financial Incentives

Rapport and developing trust with children are key aspects of the manipulation process. Asking questions regarding differential treatment, material enticements, financial incentives, or special privileges provided to children should be topics covered in the interview.

- "What type of things did [...] first do with you?"
- "Did [...] give you or your friends something?" (If yes, then utilize the pairing principle "Tell me about [...].")
- "What did [...] say about your parents/caretakers/others?" (people significant to child)

Implication for Practice

Research clearly indicates that (if the child has provided episodic cues) changing the wording of the question "Tell me about a time" to "What happened one time...?" or "What happened the time in the shed?" can help avoid miscommunication and assist the child in providing an action-based narrative of an event.

Keeping the Secret

Interviewers should explore the child's decision-making processes regarding disclosure. To better understand the challenges a child faces when contemplating disclosure, the following questions can be asked:

- “Did you ever think about telling?” If yes, “Tell me about [...].”
- “What kinds of things made you think about telling?”
- “Was something ever said about telling?”
- “What kept you from telling someone?”
- “What's happened that you could now talk about [...]?”

Implications for the Interview

To understand a child's delayed disclosure, explore what happened from the beginning of an offender's interactions with a child, what kept the child silent when abuse began, and what has occurred that the child can now disclose. These steps will allow a broader understanding of the child's overall experiences and assist with understanding the reasons for delayed disclosure.

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